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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with two models of linguistic information. It does not deal with a development of the formal (or technical) characteristics of these models, but rather it inquires into their philosophical presuppositions. One such model is the one provided by the discipline known as formal semantics; the other one is based on a particular account of the role of signs in our practices. The main purpose is to argue for the thesis that the latter, and not the former, provides us with promising tools to represent a representative fragment of the information carried by language.

The main criterion that I shall use to substantiate the thesis is the following: I stipulate that any model of language should preserve our descriptions of our uses of signs in general, and language in particular, in everyday life. With this criterion at hand I carry out the assessment of formal semantics on the basis of two arguments: ‘the case of rules of language’ and ‘the case of incomplete understanding’. Such arguments show that the formal semanticist’s model does not preserve our descriptions of language-use in everyday life.

To introduce my alternative, practice-based model I appeal to the following way of conceptualizing information: what does a 10 Euro bill stand for? And if we did manage to find out what it stands for, would the relation between the bill and this mysterious referent account for how the bill is meaningful to us? Instead of going down this rabbit hole, I take it that a 10 Euro bill is only meaningful because of the role that it plays in people’s everyday transactions. For instance, a 10 Euro bill can be used by someone to pay for a cappuccino, it could be the change received after buying a beer, it could be a child’s monthly contribution to the piggy bank, etc. In short, the role of signs in our everyday practices accounts for many of our concepts.

I believe that a semantic theory can profitably make use of the following elements: (a) a theory of practices, in particular, I will make use of Schatzki’s theory of social practices; (b) an account of the role that words and expressions play in practices, which can be derived from the above-mentioned theory of practices; (c)

an account of how these roles underwrite the speaker's ability to comprehend and produce words; and (d) an account of literal meanings.

If my arguments are sound, they will show that an explanation of linguistic information requires taking the notion of a practice into account. To be sure, such picture requires a radically different account of language, linguistic competence, and linguistic communication, but I believe these alternative accounts provide us with promising tools to study our 'human world' and our 'human nature', in which language is paramount.